

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, 16th August, 2015
Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, Bristol

Text: John 6. 51 -58

Sermon given by Paul Denyer

Toast and marmalade for breakfast, a baguette with cheese for lunch, naan bread with your curry for supper –whenever you eat it and in whatever form, bread is your versatile, life-giving friend. Some say the person who made the first wheel was the greatest innovator of history; I think that accolade should go to the person who baked the first loaf!

We need the carbohydrate in bread. The enzymes and acids in our bodies convert it to glucose in our bloodstream which gives us energy –energy which can be expended instantly or stored for later use. How our bodies work is quite extraordinary and wonderful!

So it is particularly apposite that Jesus should choose for Himself the metaphor of bread. Jesus makes seven 'I am' statements in Saint John's Gospel and 'I am the bread of life' is one of them. So it's bread we're thinking about today.

But, bread *in itself* does not produce energy for living. Left to itself, it simply grows stale, mouldy and inedible. It is wasted fuel. It needs our agency to be effective and to fulfil its potential. Likewise, our body, without bread (and the other foods which sustain it) withers and dies. If Jesus is the bread of life, He needs our agency to be effective. This is the divine symbiosis. Jesus lives in and through us, and we live in and through Jesus. Saint Matthew tells us that, when Jesus visited the region where He grew up, the locals took offence at Him and He was unable to do many miracles there. Why? *"Because of their unbelief"*. He needed their faith and, when He didn't find it, He moved on.

This teaching comes close on the heels of the feeding of the five thousand when five loaves and two fish satisfy the hunger of the crowd on the hillside. Following this extraordinary episode, the people of Galilee are very keen to follow Jesus. Are we surprised? If He can produce mass catering on this scale why should they ever be short of food again? Jesus was very aware of the risk He was taking when performing miracles. The people will love the miracle but ignore its meaning. The people wanted material bread –a miraculous show- not the bread from heaven, and the disciples wanted the physical Jesus to be with them forever; they didn't want Him to leave them comfortless. They didn't want the responsibility! And people nowadays ask why God isn't sorting out the mess we're in? But the story of the Gospel is not the story of a man who works wonders, so we can sit back and leave everything to Him. Jesus rose from the dead –yes He did- but He quickly ascended into heaven because He wanted us to receive the Holy Spirit

and become life for the world. *We* are the Body of Christ. *We* are the leaven in the dough. *We* are the light in the darkness. *We* are to feed the hungry and set people free. The bread of life is given, not for us to become arrested adolescents who never grow up, but in order to activate the Jesus life which is in us. That is what baptism into the life of Christ means.

Well, this may appeal to you –or it may not- theologically. But how does it work out at the practical, human level? Take the example of Gareth Malone. He may be familiar to you as a television presenter who manages to convert groups of people, who say they can't sing, into a choir capable of putting on an effective public performance.

Some of you will have seen the programme he did locally in which he galvanised the staff and management of the Royal Mail depot at Filton into an excited, if nervous, choir, who went on to sing at the Albert Hall. It was the surprise, delight and enthusiasm -despite their fears- that *made* the programme –and it did us good to watch it! They never believed they had it in them –not in a thousand years! But they did! This is what *The Guardian Newspaper* says of Gareth Malone: "If there's a reason for Malone's rise ... it's his gift of lighting people up, as it were, from the inside, by making them *want* to sing". Exactly! That's just how Jesus works. He lightens people up, from the inside. 'Shine, Jesus shine!' Indeed! And it is the Jesus we are who shines! In

Jesus, we become the living bread which feeds the world.

Yesterday we kept the Feast of Mary, the Blessed Virgin. There's a wonderful story in Mary's life which well illustrates what I am saying! One day –and this was before Mary gives birth to Jesus- she visits her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth is pregnant and, we are told, when Mary greets her, the baby leaps in Elizabeth's womb. At the same time, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. This wasn't just a baby doing some pre-natal hand-stands, but the presence of the Holy Spirit of God. A baby is not only a joyful bundle of physical vitality but a joyful sign of the incarnate presence of Jesus!

In today's reading from the Old Testament, Solomon asks for wisdom. He doesn't ask for the riches and status we associate with worldly power –for *material* bread as it were- but for spiritual bread, for *wisdom*.

Today, we gather to receive the bread and wine of Holy Eucharist. Is that it? -a processed wafer, made from wheat flour and water, and wine made from grapes and bought from a specialist ecclesiastical retailer? It's got to be more than that! We are in the presence of Jesus! We are taking and eating the bread of life. As the baby leapt in Elizabeth's womb, something stirs and leaps in our hearts.

But, Jesus is not a magic wonder-worker. This morning He is not about to give us all personality make-overs! What He *will* do is transform the person we already are and encourage in us the gifts we already have! He will show us that, despite our weakness, the person we are can become the better person God knows we can be. So don't let fear or false modesty get in God's way!

Jesus says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person. As the living Father sent me and I draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will also draw life from me." Sisters and brothers, we are what we eat! So let's eat and enjoy the living bread today!